

**Lister Sinclair**

I'm Lister Sinclair and this is Ideas, with Part 9 of David Cayley's series, *The Education Debates*. Tonight, we conclude the section of the series devoted to thinkers who have challenged the very institution of education as it presently exists. In the previous two episodes, we looked at the philosophy of deschooling as it emerged in the sixties and as it continues today in the home schooling and free school movement. In this program, you'll hear first from Frank Smith, a writer who's devoted much of his career to thinking about how we learn. He thinks that much of modern schooling has been based on a profound intellectual error--the belief that learning is primarily memorization.

**Frank Smith**

I think if you ask most people in education, most people in academia these days what memory is, they will, in fact, say it's a storehouse. Now, in my view, memory is not a storehouse. In fact, memory isn't a particular process or a particular location for anything. Memory is us. Memory is who we are and how we got to where we are now.

**Lister Sinclair**

In the second half of tonight's program, you'll meet John Taylor Gatto, the author of '*Dummy Us Down: The Hidden Curriculum of Compulsory Schooling*'. Gatto was a celebrated teacher in New York City schools for 30 years. He now writes and lectures about compulsory schooling as an instrument of domination.

**David Taylor Gatto**

If forced schooling were an institution that had any real justification, it would have appeared somewhere in human history, prior to the middle of the 19th century. And it doesn't. It just doesn't appear. Churches appear. Armies appear. Kings appear. But schools don't appear.

**Lister Sinclair**

John Taylor Gatto and Frank Smith, tonight on Part 9 of *The Education Debates* by David Cayley.

**David Cayley**

In the April 1995 edition of '*The Phi Delta Kappan*', a widely read American journal of education, an article by Frank Smith appeared.

It was called 'Let's Declare Education a Disaster and Get On With Our Lives'. The disaster is that educational theory has turned learning into a fetish. Learning, in Smith's view, is an outcome, a result of meaningful experience, not an industrial process into which we can feed whatever we like. School, he says, is based on a false theory of learning, a theory of control, and that is not how people learn. Frank Smith is a Londoner who left school himself at 15. He did a stint in the Navy and then spent a number of years in the newspaper business as a reporter and editor. He was 33 before he went to Harvard to pursue an interest in language and in learning.

Later, he taught at the Ontario Institute for Studies in Education and at the University of Victoria. He's written extensively about reading and writing and many of his ideas have become part of what is labelled the whole language approach to reading. Smith, however, is sceptical of labels, saying that they tend to become ideologies and lead to simplification, misinterpretation and confusion. In his most recent work, '*The Book of Learning and Forgetting*', he has taken on what he calls the "official theory of learning", the approach that he thinks has made education a disaster, and contrasted it with his preferred approach which he calls "the classic view of learning". The official theory is that learning is hard and requires careful organization. The classic view is that learning is as native to us as breathing. We do it easily and we do it all the time.

**Frank Smith**

I was always astounded that all of this learning that we seem to do so effortlessly out of school got so difficult once we got into school or got into university. And what I discovered, of course, was that we continued learning and we learned all the time when we went into educational institutions. The point is we didn't learn what we were expected to learn. People thought that we'd learn all matters of facts and particular skills in particular areas, abilities like reading and writing and the rest of it. In fact, what kids were learning was attitude towards these things and attitudes towards themselves.

The learning is there, but we ignore the learning that actually takes place and we focus all our attention on the learning that isn't taking place.

### **David Cayley**

What kids are learning, when they aren't learning their lessons, Smith says, are attitudes to themselves and to the subjects they're being taught. The reason, he thinks, is that we learn not as a task but by identification.

We learn what fits our sense of who we are and who we want to be.

### **Frank Smith**

We actually learn, I think, to become the kind of person that we see ourselves as being. We identify with other people and so if you see yourself as belonging to the community of writers, then you'll become a writer. You will write. You will learn from writing. You will learn from reading. You'll become a writer. But if your experience in school or outside school teaches you that you can't write, if you attempt to write a poem and somebody says to you, look, 17 spelling mistakes and your punctuation is all wrong, you'll never be a writer, then that's it. That's what you learn. We're terribly vulnerable because we learn from the way people treat us. We learn from our experiences. This is what school should be. School should be a place where kids have particular kinds of experiences, the kinds of experiences out of which we know they will develop into particular kinds of persons. So

you shouldn't go to school in order to study reading or writing or arithmetic. You should go to school in order to do it, as an apprentice, if you like, to the teacher or as an apprentice to ... reading is incredibly important, as an apprentice to the author of the books that you read or to characters in the books that you read. Anywhere where there can be some kind of identification, where you can say this is the kind of person I am. What you learn inside school and outside school is the kind of person that you are. That's what you learn. And school should expand the boundaries of the kind of person that we see ourselves being.

School should be the kind of place where you can have experiences that you very probably wouldn't have in the world outside school.

### **David Cayley**

In 'The Book of Learning and Forgetting', Frank Smith epitomizes the classic view of learning by a familiar proverb: You learn from the company you keep. This company, as he has said, can include characters in books and their authors as well as our actual acquaintances. What we learn from the company we keep, from our experiences, simply becomes part of us. We can also learn by memorization on command, he acknowledges, but this learning is always fleeting and ephemeral.

### **Frank Smith**

Two kinds of things go on with learning. One, which is at the core of this classic view, is that learning is growth and that once you've learned that's it, you're stuck with it. It may not be constantly in your consciousness but it's there.

It will come back when you need it and it will colour all of your behaviour and your values and your judgement. That's one. The second thing is, indeed, memorization. We have a short-term memory and we can things in there and hold them for a brief period of time, for as long they're sort of relevant to us, until we take an examination or a test or whatever, until we recite what we want to do with them at an interview like this. But

afterwards it goes. It's very transient. There are a number of basic physiological differences between things in short-term memory and things in long-term memory. Our short-term memories seem to be bio-electrical activity and long-term memory seems to be chemical. Smith argues that the official theory of learning, the idea that we learn as a task, rather than by an expansion of our selves, grows out of the metaphors we use for memory. Misled by the technologies we use to store information, we come to think that our own memories must be of the same kind.

### **Frank Smith**

I think if you ask most people in education, most people in academia these days, what memory is, they will, in fact, say it's a storehouse; memory is a place where you put away little nuggets of information that you can draw on in the future. And of course, the computer technology that we use so much these days, you know, metaphorically is ... induces us to ... encourages us to take this point of view that memory is a kind of storehouse that we're not using all the time but when it's useful we'll go into it and pull something out that we need. Now, in my view, memory is not a storehouse. In fact, memory isn't a particular process or a particular location for anything. Memory is us. We live in our memories. We can't separate ourselves from our memories. Take our memory away, we're nothing. Memory is who we are and how we got to where we are now.

### **David Cayley**

Smith's theory of memory supports his idea that we learn from what happens to us and not from programmed instruction. The idea that Up to about 150 years ago, the prevailing view of education was that you learn from the company you keep, the classic point of view that I've been talking about. So if you want your child to be a musician, you send your child off to the Conservatory. If you want your child to be a fisherman, you send your child to sea. If you want your child to have a particular

change. Yeah, actual change in the structure of the brain.

### **David Cayley**

learning has to be organized as a series of tasks goes back to the first half of the 19th century when the idea of a mass system of education originated. Its first model was the Prussian Army as it was reorganized after its defeat by Napoleon in 1805. Smith describes the process of this reorganization as follows. They selected recruits of the same age, height, weight and experience, put them into separate barracks, subjected them to remorseless discipline and drill, threw out the ones who couldn't make it and forged a totally standardized, predictable and reliable product--the Prussian soldier. It was while serving as a Prussian soldier that Frederick Froebel, now remembered as the inventor of the Kindergarten, first dreamed of what he called the "universal German educational institution".

The success of the Prussian Army led to the adoption of its methods in education. Prussia became a Mecca for school promoters like Egerton Ryerson from Canada and Horace Mann from the United States. But traces of this militaristic origin, Smith says, are still visible in the vocabulary of education. Common words like deployment, recruitment, promotion, drill and strategy all reveal it, as do learning target, batteries of tests and various sorts of campaigns. None of this, Smith says, was present before the 19th century.

### **Frank Smith**

craft or a particular skill, then you sign your child up as an apprentice to a craftsman or you try to get your child into a particular guild. It was understood this is the way you learn. You don't learn by standing back from something and hearing about it. You learn by being involved in it. And I think the first thing that happened--and it didn't just happen in

education--but the first thing that happened in about the 1850s, was that people decided that education and agriculture and manufacturing needed to be systematized. It wasn't a question of changing the machinery in order to fit the individual, but changing the individual to fit the machinery. In other words, getting them to, you know, work the way the machinery works in the cotton mills and in the mines and so forth. And in agriculture, the idea that if you really want to raise cattle, the idea is to get them all at the same age, put them all in the same confinement sheds, give them exactly the same food, and then they're all going to turn out in exactly the same state at the end. I think it's indicative that the whole notion that the best way to breed chickens is to put them into batteries, you know, came into agriculture at the same time the whole notion that the best way to educate kids was to put them into batteries and treat them to batteries of tests came into schools. And so education started to get organized, first of all, by putting walls into classrooms so that older kids couldn't interact with younger kids, which I think was a tremendous social change because outside school it's the older kids who always teach the younger kids. I mean, that's just the way of life. We talk about organizing children on the basis of age and ability as though that's the highest ideal of education. But in fact, I think what we're doing is organizing kids on the basis of inexperience and inability to help anyone else. We're organizing them on the basis of ignorance, as though the ideal classroom situation is when no child can help any other child in the classroom. And in fact, they're discouraged from doing that, as you know, because that's called cheating.

### **David Cayley**

Yes, I know. It's (unclear) just the same.

### **Frank Smith**

Yeah, well, people thought, as they still do, that the best way to teach anybody anything was to segregate the individual, to lose the individual in the group and then segregate that group

from other groups so that, in fact, everybody--the teacher and the students--could get on with the serious business of learning, which was memorization.

And the only way that it would work would be for everybody to be at exactly the same spot at the same time. Which is, of course, the antithesis of the classic view of learning.

### **David Cayley**

Education, at this point, had sorted the children into standard groups, but had not yet organized its subject matter in a scientific way.

This was the goal its organizers began to pursue next.

### **David Smith**

Until that point, there was no theory of learning or, if you like, the theory of learning was that you learn from the company you keep. But what they wanted was to make learning scientific, and in order for learning to be scientific you've got to have something that you can measure something, you can count, you've got to have a unit and you've got to be able to conduct experiments. Nobody had any idea of how you could do any of these things. We've can say it was recognized that learning was a function of interest and comprehension, interest and past experience. But people differ all the time on the basis of what they're interested in and past experience. So how could you possibly compare people on any aspect of learning without some, in fact, getting all your data muddied by what they are particularly interested in and by what they particularly have a lot of experience in? And then it was all solved. It was all solved by one man and we know exactly who is responsible for this. He was a psychologist. He was a Prussian. His name was Hermann Ebbinghaus, and he tackled this problem of how psychology, psychology itself wanted to become a science, so they needed something they could measure. So he tackled this problem of finding something in learning that was not contaminated--that's the scientific word; we still

use it today--that was not contaminated by past experience or interest. And Ebbinghaus had this enormous insight that apparently is one of the few scientific discoveries or claimed scientific discoveries that was totally originally, totally unique. There was no predecessor for this idea, which would make one suspicious, wouldn't it. But Ebbinghaus came up with this brilliant idea that if you want to study learning without contaminating your data with past Ebbinghaus, like Froebel, had been a soldier in the Prussian Army. He had fought in Prussia's successful war with France at the beginning of the 1870s and then had gone to the University of Berlin as a philosophy instructor. To construct his laws of learning, he created lists of meaningless syllables and then studied his own efforts to learn them.

### **Frank Smith**

Incredibly, he shut himself away and ... for two years, and he looked at how long it took him to learn these meaningless syllables in groups of ten and groups of twelve. How many learning trials or how many repetitions he required. And what he got, which is what delighted him, of course, was lawful results, predictable results. And you can ... this applies all over the world. You can take a group of people in Africa, a group of people in China, a group of people in Britain, give them a meaningless learning task and they will ... perform it exactly the same way. They'll learn the first two or three items pretty quickly. After that it takes more and more time to learn successive items until you reach about ten, when it flattens out. You've gone as far as you can go. It's called the Learning Curve. You can attach an algebraic formulation to it, a formula to it. It's the learning curve, and it's all based on nonsense. You could push people up the curve. It's the origin of the contemporary view that if a child doesn't learn something the first time, teach it to them a second time, teach it to them a third time. You can push them up. Learning is work. If people are working hard enough, if they're probably motivated, if they give them the right rewards, you can get them

experience, comprehension and interest, what you do is study how people learn nonsense. If you study nonsense, nobody, by definition, can make any sense of it. And nobody has got any interest in nonsense. It's pure. It's unsullied learning, according to Ebbinghaus.

### **David Cayley**

up the curve.

### **David Cayley**

So this is the main sequel to Ebbinghaus? The idea of difficulty and repetition?

### **Frank Smith**

Yeah, that's it. Yeah. That repetition will result in learning. And that you can ensure learning by simply pushing people up. But you see, it had this wonderful advantage to the organizers of education. Not to teachers, but to people outside education who wanted to organize it in that there were units that you could count, units that you could measure. So you could say this child has learned several of these things today and this child has only learned five. And so ... and that very quickly that was all that attention was paid to in the classroom--the ability to perform this nonsensical task. And once again, if kids could make any sense of what they were supposed to learn, the vocabulary items or the punctuation items or the spelling or something, that ... it was regarded as akin to cheating because they had some kind of advantage, they didn't have to work to do the learning. But incidentally, you should remember--you should remember--Ebbinghaus discovered two things. You know, the first thing he discovered was this learning curve that you can push people all the way up the curve, which psychology has never forgotten and education has never forgotten. But Ebbinghaus also discovered that there was a forgetting curve, that immediately after the last learning trial, immediately after the last repetition, you started to forget, and the

forgetting was precipitous, just as you got up the first two or three items pretty quickly but then it was progressively more timely to getting the... to learning the rest, so once you started to forget, once you stopped rehearsing, once you started to forget you forgot half of what you'd learned almost immediately and then the rest of it just sort of tailed off.

### **David Cayley**

But everyone overlooked this aspect.

### **Frank Smith**

Everyone forgot it. Yes. Yes. And it's ... and everybody knows this. Everybody knows

### **Frank Smith**

The big thing that came along, that really hammered psychology's crazy theory of learning into education was the testing movement because testing and the official theory of learning go hand in hand. What testing needs is a small unit that you can measure, that you can count, that you can compare and contrast and these days, heaven help us, you know, publish the league tables for how schools are doing on this matter of systematic, nonsensical learning. And you've never been able to separate the two. Even today, President Clinton decides that he's going to be the educating president, do something else, and yet, what is he going to do? More tests. What does Tony Blair do in Britain? More tests. What does every provincial government in Canada do when they say they're going to improve education? They devise more tests. And the tests and the curriculum are locked together in this progressive, fragmentary way of learning. Or try to get kids to learn, memorization. And it's all doomed to get us nowhere because they're forgetting ... that the tragedy is that the actual experience of trying to learn and the actual experience of passing a test or not passing a test is something that we can never forget.

### **David Cayley**

It was this tendency to intensify the application of the official theory of learning, whenever the

that you can cram for an examination and push away more or less what you want for the exam, but then the moment you take the examination, then you start to forget it.

### **David Cayley**

The adoption of psychology's scientific theory of learning changed education, Smith says. Whole, meaningful activities were replaced by lists, dates, exercises and other segmented tasks. The rituals of instruction became more important than the experience of the students and teachers became experimenters who needed to be able to test their results.

Because we learn that in the classic way. It changes us as a person.

### **David Cayley**

Once this mechanical teach and test cycle was established, Smith argues, it tended to perpetuate itself. If it didn't work, it must because either the students or the teachers were doing it wrong.

### **Frank Smith**

Ever since then, I think the people who've tried to control education have said ... have first blamed teachers and said teachers aren't doing it properly and, second, think, well, they're not having enough of it, so we need to have more of these little programs that hand out little bits (unclear) more of the rewards and incentives and motivations and little punishments to ensure that kids attend to this work and do this work and get them more ways of punishing teachers, more ways of ensuring that teachers keep doing this. All of these people who produce educational programs which never succeed blame teachers or blame students and say we just need more, we just need more.

schools were perceived to be failing that led Smith to declare education a disaster in his Phi Delta Kappan article in 1995. The only way to

get off this merry-go-round, he reasoned in his essay, would be to abandon the whole enterprise, rather than trying to refine it or fix it.

### **Frank Smith**

I was arguing that education had got beyond the point where it was a problem. And people always talk about the problem of education which can then be patched up. I think we've been doing this for far too long as if it worked. What we have is a disaster and we have to save ourselves. Teachers have to save themselves. They have to save their students. Students have to save themselves.

### **David Cayley**

Is this disaster more evident in 1995 than it was in 1975, '35?

### **Frank Smith**

I think so. Yeah. Yes. Because the only thing that is consistent over this entire period is the build-up of control, of external control of education. More and more influence by more and more people outside classrooms. I mean, the big changes in education don't come from teachers. The changes in education come from outside. And teachers have to adapt to these. And there's more and more control until, you know, one might think that eventually the whole system becomes so top-heavy that it will be recognized that we'd better give the job back to teachers. You see, I see the problem in schools, not with people, not with teachers, but with taking all initiative and all autonomy

### **David Cayley**

The way to put education back into the hands of teachers, in Smith's view, is to abolish the Official Theory of Learning and all its apparatus. The proposal sounds revolutionary, but he believes it could be realized one step at a time. The key would be to re-establish the Classic View of learning. Then, he says finally, the way people naturally are would become an advantage instead of a disadvantage.

### **Frank Smith**

away from people and putting them into the procedures that are devised by people outside the classroom. Now, I think it's reached disaster proportions. But this doesn't mean that I ... you know, I don't want to take the analogy too far. It's not ... I mean, the Titanic sank. It would. But I'm not suggesting that we abandon schools or set fire to schools or something like this. I think what we've got to do is recognize that the educational system itself is not working--and nobody's claiming that it's working; even the people who want to control it have to admit that their efforts to control in the past haven't worked--and save what is critical about education which is the relationship between the teacher and the student.

### **David Cayley**

Why is that what's critical?

### **Frank Smith**

Because learning is a social activity. It's the classic view that you learn from the experiences you have with people with whom you can identify, with people to whom you can apprentice yourself. And this is what's been taken away. All of the social interaction in schools has been removed so kids don't help each other any more, teachers don't help kids any more. Teachers don't help each other any more. And all of the control has been put in the hands of people in systems, bureaucrats and experts outside the classroom.

Nobody has to tell us we've got to make sense of the world. We look for consistency. We look for conventions. We look for reasons why other people do things. We look to make sense of the world. And that's what drives children to make sense of language, eventually to make sense of reading and writing and mathematics. Kids want to understand the world. We do not enjoy confusion. We do not enjoy not understanding where we are and why we're there. But the second thing is we have this remarkable ability to, in fact, make sense of the world. We also have a

remarkable ability to empathize with other people and to help them make sense of the world. You just have to look at how people carry on in situations outside schools to see how they will help each other, how they will try to make things clear to each other. If somebody's struggling with something, they try to help them to do it. I think that we all feel uncomfortable if we see someone who is confused. We all feel uncomfortable if we see someone who is beaten down by a particular situation. We're all natural teachers. We all want to share our enthusiasm. We all want to share those things that fascinate us. Now, I ... my (unclear) basically is that being a person is a good thing.

\* \* \*

### **David Cayley**

Frank Smith criticizes the way schooling has been structured but still thinks that the I had been an advertising copywriter and I borrowed a teaching license and did some substitute teaching because I had had a belly full, for the moment, of copywriting and I wanted to see if I could learn something about myself from school teaching. I mean, there was no great calling. And so since New York City had no particular concern about whether I was actually who the license said I was, I subbed for a while and found it intriguing that the schools that I encountered were obviously involved in some slowing of normal mental growth. I don't know if I would have put it as succinctly as that at the time. Let me give you a specific. I was assigned to teach a Spanish course and I don't think they had any idea whether I spoke any or not. But I spoke a little Spanish. So I asked the kids what they had had so far. Apparently they'd had nothing. I said, well, I'm going to teach you how to tell time. And inside of one class everybody could tell time in Spanish. Well, word got back to the administration. I was hauled on the carpet and literally screamed at. I was told that I had destroyed the entire curriculum for the month of June, which was to teach them how to tell

institution could be remade to fit a more realistic account of learning. American teacher John Taylor Gatto, whose thoughts I'll be presenting in the balance of tonight's program, takes a darker and more political view of the school institution. He believes that in his country over the last 100 years, mass compulsory schooling has functioned as a counter-revolution, turning the free, self-reliant people who emerged from the American war of independence into a pliable, unthinking mass. John Gatto, I should say at the outset, is a heretic, a passionate dissenter from the religion of schooling. But he has surprising credentials, having been a teacher in New York City for many years, and latterly a very celebrated one, winning New York State Teacher of the Year honours in 1991. He got into education in the first place, he says, almost by chance.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

time. And I was baffled. I said, but it only takes 15 minutes. So I wasn't hired back at that place. But I would encounter this over and over again, problems that weren't problems at all. The problems were necessary to justify the apparatus. And again, I won't claim any great wisdom about this. It's just I had a natural young man's antagonism toward stuffed shirts and stupid people so I decided to stay in teaching for a couple of years and see what was possible, bringing a western Pennsylvanian sensibility to New York schools. And I got in way, way over my head.

It was quite wonderful. How many young men are given any responsibility to speak out?

And here was more responsibility than you could dream of, as much as you wanted, in fact. You had this sovereignty over 120 lives. So one thing led to another and after 30 years I left teaching.

### **David Cayley**

John Gatto noticed, from the very outset of his career as a teacher, that the schools in which he worked seemed to inhibit their students intellectually. The obvious corollary was that

students were capable of much more than was normally asked of them. So he decided to see how far he could go.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

The first thing you had to do was not look at the records or the data that had been accumulated on these kids, and you simply pitched the lesson and its particles on the highest level you were capable of. And you tried to see whether the kids were adequate to swim in that water. And I found (unclear) that they, in fact, are once you get past the, you know, the idiomatic differences between a western Pennsylvanian in his late 20s or early 30s and, you know, a 13-year-old Manhattan kid. That takes a little while. But after that, all of us are fascinated with ideas, especially kids. What we call outstanding adult performance is accessible to almost any

### **John Taylor Gatto**

I got too famous. The only way I was able to operate as a guerrilla school teacher was essentially to keep a low profile, to pay off some of my potential enemies like custodians are the most potent member of any building. But whiskey usually works with a custodian. And just treating them with respect, setting other political enemies against each other in ways that would take too long to go into. But in order to do that, I had to have a fairly low profile. With a low profile, I was able to take the hundred or 130 kids I got every year and actually write an individual curriculum for each one of them, with the help of their parents whenever I could get that, or older brothers. So my kids were shooting around like popcorn popping, all over the city of New York and even all over the state of New York and New Jersey.

And if I say nobody knew that, the few people who knew about it also saw that it was quiet and they weren't going to get their necks chopped off. But gradually, as my kids built up this phenomenal track record and got their names in papers and started businesses, more and more film teams and radio teams would come around and eventually I won these awards and then more and more film teams

13-year-old. We don't have an economy or a society capable of accommodating what human beings are capable of rather easily and very inexpensively. I mean, none of this costs a nickel.

### **David Cayley**

John Gatto conducted his classes as university-style seminars, emphasizing dialectic or the logical examination of ideas. Over the course of his career, he worked in three different schools--one upper middle class, one with kids of mixed class and ethnic backgrounds and one with poor kids in Harlem.

The differences, he says, were hardly worth noting. Even the poorest kids, he came to feel, had the same intellectual potential as those at the pinnacle of the bell curve. But what finally defeated him, he says, was the attention his success attracted.

would come around. And with the film teams would come official teams looking for the secret of my success. Well, the secret of my success was to write myself a blank cheque and to operate in a thoroughly illegal fashion most of the time. I couldn't do that under this constant scrutiny. Or at least I couldn't do it with that just immense stress. So finally I realized that my methodology had worked too well, that I wasn't going to be able to use it any longer. And at that point I was New York State Teacher of the Year and I resigned on the Op. Ed. Page of the Wall Street Journal on July 15, 1991. My kids, who had ... some of my students had grown up, rented Carnegie Hall for me and I gave an evening concert at Carnegie Hall that November where I was able to offer an audience different ways to look at this process of transformation from childhood into adulthood. And I expected that to be the end of teaching. I have a farm in upstate New York. I was going to be a garlic farmer. And I got a call from NASA Goddard Space Centre and the engineers wanted to talk to me. And then I got a call from Apple Computer. And then I got a call from the White House. So I said to my wife, you know, I mean, as long as ... as long as they don't tell me what to say, I

assumed that would be over in six months and it's seven years later and it still continues. I don't advertise my lectures and workshops and when they terminate I won't be unhappy. But I feel obligated to do what used to be called, David, bearing witness. I wanted to bear witness about what I saw in 30 years inside institutional schooling.

### **David Cayley**

John Gatto's witness has taken him all over North America as a lecturer and produced a spate of articles and books, including 'Dumbing Us Down'. There are direct pathological effects that rise out of the invisible curriculum of schooling. There's an indifference to the adult world and its announced standards. There's an elimination of curiosity and concentration. There's a difficulty connecting the present to the future. There's a difficulty connecting the present and the future to the past. There's a taste for cruelty and moral numbness that is cumulative. And we're seeing now the beginning of what I would expect to become quite an interesting epidemic. As one boy said to me day before yesterday when I said, well, you know they're going to take your guns away from you, and he said, "I don't need guns," he said. "Five dollars worth of gasoline poured down through the air ducts," he said, "will do a better job." And he's right. Well, will we then ration gasoline? There's an uneasiness with intimacy and candour. There's a disloyalty to family and friends. Children become obsessively materialistic and finally they become dependent, passive and timid in the face of new situations. And all of these effects are the product of schooling. But the subtle part of this, David, is that all of these effects are extremely useful in making a mass production economy and a highly organized, highly layered society self-justifying. ... for a moment. Suppose that you and I, over a pitcher of beer or iced tea, whatever, suppose you and I decided to create some structural way to make young people indifferent to everything. And suppose we came up with the idea that we would

'Dumbing Us Down', 'The Exhausted School', and, soon to be published, 'The Empty Child'. These writings have argued that compulsory schooling teaches a hidden curriculum that is much more powerful than its overt subjects. This curriculum produces estrangement between students, frustration, weak powers of expression, alienation from traditions and a sense that one can only learn under duress by certified experts. These effects are evident, Gatto says, in the behaviour of students.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

You point and you say, well, how could you trust these people or do you really believe that those broken men and women could take care of themselves without, you know, interventions, a whole variety of them, on the part of trained experts? So you create the situation that justifies the order we have. I mean, it's just an immense problem. There's almost no way that you can see to enter that system and alter it, except temporarily and cosmetically. I don't think change will come from leaders debating things to do.

### **David Cayley**

How would you say these effects are produced? Why indifference to adults as a result of schooling? Why diminished curiosity?

### **John Taylor Gatto**

All right. Well, let's take a ... (voices overlap--unclear) ...

### **David Cayley**

Why cruelty?

### **John Taylor Gatto**

enthusiastically launch them on an hourly basis on one or another project of art or thinking and then we would ring a bell and say you must stop and move immediately away from this. And we did that for year after year after year. Would that not produce an internal mechanism

that said nothing is worth finishing? And if nothing's worth finishing, isn't the logical next step that very few things are worth beginning? And all the enthusiasm about adults and starting is contradicted by this bell, and then the adult's adamant insistence that you stop doing what you're doing? I mean, it's a system of animal training and I would expect it to work with almost anyone who didn't have an outside source of wisdom. So I would expect it to be cumulative. Each generation would be worse than the generation that preceded it, because each adult component of a generation would have less and less memory of ... of a better way.

### **David Cayley**

John Gatto traces the story of how the United States got this system of education back to the turn of the century. A booming industrial economy had generated vast new fortunes and a new ruling class made up of those who had gained these fortunes. This new economy demanded a manageable citizenry and a system of mass compulsory schooling was seen as a way of achieving this end. Those who planned and promoted this system were often disarmingly frank, at least by today's standards, about their intentions. An influential University of Wisconsin sociologist called Edward Roth, wrote plainly in a manifesto published in 1906 called 'Social Control'. "Plans are underway," he said, "to replace community, family and church with propaganda, education and mass media." Around the same time, John D. Rockefeller's General Education Board laid out its mission. Its dream, the board said, was to have "people yield themselves with perfect docility to our moulding hands." H.H. Goddard, who was then Chairman of the Psychology Department at Princeton, pronounced government schooling to be "the perfect organization of the hive".

In John Gatto's view, the system produced by these designs has undermined the civility, the intelligence and the independent-mindedness

### **John Taylor Gatto**

of Americans. Young Americans today are kept in a state of frustrated dependency. Adolescents of an earlier era, he says, were far more competent, far more enterprising and far more attune to their world.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

Thomas Jefferson was running by himself, both parents dead, a 2,500-acre farm with 250 employees at the age of 13. George Washington didn't go to school 'til he was eleven, and the first subject he studied was trigonometry. He then became a crackerjack surveyor by the time he was 13 and by the time he was 17 he was the official surveyor of Culpepper County, Virginia. Admiral Dewey, who was the first American admiral, sailed a warship from Peru to Boston in 1815. It was a captured British warship. He was the only one available. He was 12 years old. He was the captain. He had two guns on and when the British captain appeared above deck he told him, "Sir," he said, "You will be dead if you do that again, and thrown over the side." He was twelve. Thomas Edison had a newspaper business making big bucks when he was twelve years old. He was reporting Civil War news to passengers on long distance trains between the lower peninsula of Michigan and the upper peninsula. He had access to a telegraph. He had the war news first. He sold it for a dime to a quarter. Sometimes he would sell a thousand copies at a stop. You know, making in one hour what an adult working man would make in several months.

### **David Cayley**

What the resourcefulness of these admittedly remarkable boys reveals to John Gatto is how much young people are capable of when they are not kept apart from their society. Schooling existed in their world, but it had not yet become a monopoly. It was still diverse, occasional and quite circumscribed in its aim.

There was a great many types of schooling

available in the United States, a whole artist's palate of types. They would run typically twelve to 16 weeks a year, a couple of hours a day. The standard was the one room school house which was immensely ... if you're going to school at all, it's immensely efficient to mix together ages because the responsibility, the necessity has to be granted to children when you do that. No one can manage xix or seven ages mixed together. They have to be self-managing or it won't work. But in learning to self-manage and sustaining this institutional form over the years, you know, immense good resulted from that, in human terms, responsible people who look out for each other and who know how to do things and who know how to learn things from each other. Clearly, the school institution we have now is deliberately meant to intercept those possibilities and to mediate all learning nominally through an adult authority called a teacher, but actually, David, I mean, can we really be honest? Teachers aren't teachers; they're pedagogues. The Roman word for an academic slave who never thought in policy terms. They don't create curriculum. They administer a curriculum created by strangers. They're ... I mean, the net effect of this, after twelve years with most kids, is to create a permanent bell curve of broken people and incomplete people. This is exactly what a mass production economy has to have. It can't survive without incomplete people who depend on instruction and buy what they're told to buy.

### **David Cayley**

In his public appearances, John Gatto continues to promote this Jeffersonian ideal. He wants to restore sovereignty and self-rule by individuals, families and communities and he wants to encourage real variation between them. To him, this means an end to uniform schooling, and a recognition that there are as many ways to grow up as there are people.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

I see it's hopeful to allow as many varieties of

John Gatto believes that in the final analysis schools create this condition of dependency because it fits the social order. However, he does not say that this is an inevitable effect of schooling. Schools could be organized in other ways. As a possible source of alternative principles, he recommends Thomas Jefferson's account of the purposes of schooling. Jefferson was a supporter of government-organized schooling, but only under five stringent conditions.

### **John Taylor Gatto**

He said the only justification to impose schooling on children is in this order: to teach people their rights, then to teach them how to defend their rights. Now, in the world you and I live in, thee's not a school we can think of that would dare to teach either of those things to children. And including the schools that we love and say these are wonderful schools. The third thing Jefferson said is to teach children not to be intimidated by experts but to become self-determining. The fourth thing he said is to teach children the ways of the human heart to such an extent that they can't be cheated or fooled. And the final thing was to teach them useful knowledge. And he gave these examples: how to build a house, how to build a boat, how to grow food, how to ride, how to hunt. And we could go on, I think, for quite some time. Well, what I did in my personal curriculum for most of 30 years was follow Jefferson's prescription.

### **David Cayley**

schooling, without any censorship at all, as the human imagination and the human heart can devise and sustain. I find in the regathering of sovereignty into personal hands, the greatest hope. And I find the greatest danger in the technologization of everyday life and the data gathering aspects of government and the need to be able to regulate and predict. I have absolute and utter trust in individuals and their ability to live decent, moral lives and to take care of themselves.

\* \* \*

**Lister Sinclair**

On Ideas tonight you've heard Part 9 of The Education Debates by David Cayley.